

Alexandria's Library: The Loss of Comprehension of Our Ancient Past

In the year 331 B.C., Alexander the Great stood with some of his advisors in the small Egyptian fishing village of Rhakotis on the Nile delta. Here Alexander decided to found a new city and name it after his favorite person, himself. Those with him had no chalk to sketch the borders and roads, so they trailed a thin line of barley flour from sacks. When birds descended from everywhere to consume the meal, Alexander thought this was a bad omen. Not so, his advisors said. Like the flour to the birds, they prophesied, Alexandria will "one day attract many and be a feeder and nurse to the world."

When Alexander died eight years later (323 B.C.), Ptolemy, one of his celebrated generals, was able to secure the part of Alexander's empire that included Egypt. He reigned as Ptolemy I (Soter) and he invited his friend Demetrius (Greece) to create the best library in the world in this new city of Alexandria. Both Ptolemy and Demetrius deserve credit for establishing the Library of Alexandria in the early 300s B.C. Demetrius had fled from a Greece that did not want him, and it was his goal to build a library that would rival even the one in Athens. Demetrius had been a student of Aristotle, and later his successor and director of Aristotle's school (the Lyceum). Hence, the new library in Alexandria was destined to be more than a collection, but a teaching and learning institution.

The Library's Growth

There was plenty of drama concerning the Library, according to the ancient sources. By the time of Ptolemy III, Alexandria required every trading ship in their docks to turn over their scrolls and books for copying. More often than not, the owners received the copies back, not the originals. Athens made the mistake of doing inter-library loan with Alexandria (pressured by a threat to cut off grain shipments), and received only copies back of some of their best texts. Through an aggressive campaign of confiscation, purchase, and copying, the Library grew to approximately 500,000 to 700,000 scrolls.

When Alexandria learned that Pergamum was seeking to rival their Library, they stopped exporting papyrus to cut off their supply. This caused translators and scholars to find something else to write on. They came up with cured animal skins made into thin parchment. Only this stacked instead of rolled, and so **the book** became popular. When Pergamum endeavored to procure Alexandria's well-known librarian, Aristophanes of Byzantium, Alexandrian authorities intercepted Aristophanes and imprisoned him for life.

The Library's Uniqueness

The Library pulled in copies of the written literature of the past and present from all over the Mediterranean, the Near East, and Mesopotamia, and upon all available subjects. This probably was the first library to be so eclectic in scope. Written in dozens of languages, including Sanskrit, these documents were translated into Alexandrian Greek. This feat was admirable enough, but the Library/Museum accomplished so much more than creating a multi-disciplinary collection in Greek. They wanted the collection to attract scholars from all over the world, and for those scholars to not only access this knowledge, but to create new knowledge, there, in Alexandria. The Library/Museum became a think-tank, observatory and laboratory. The library directors were scholars themselves, appointed by

the king, later by the Caesar. For example, Zenodotus, the director after Demetrius, was a well-known scholar of Homer. They also served as the official royal tutors. The librarians eventually established a few special subject collections in different places around the city (branch libraries of a sort), such as the Serapeion in the temple of Serapis (in Alexandria), which held over 40,000 titles.

At the Alexandria Library, Euclid wrote many of his books on geometry. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (one of the library directors) believed the oceans were connected, that Africa could be circumnavigated, and that the earth was round. His calendar was adopted by Julius Caesar. Eratosthenes' estimation of the earth's circumference erred by only 50 miles. Here the Jewish scriptures were translated from Hebrew to Greek (the Septuagint). Archimedes invented his famous screw-shaped water pump, created the discipline of hydrostatics, and worked with calculating area and volume. Ptolemy wrote the *Almagest* on the nature of the universe. Alexandria had become the intellectual capital of the world, and central to this was the Library/Museum. The history of the ancient world was contained within her scrolls.

The Library's Destruction

The first person blamed for the destruction of the Library is none other than Julius Caesar himself. In 48 B.C., Caesar was pursuing Pompey into Egypt when he was suddenly cut off by an Egyptian fleet at Alexandria. Greatly outnumbered and in enemy territory, Caesar ordered the ships in the harbor to be set on fire. The fire spread and destroyed the Egyptian fleet. Unfortunately, it also burned down part of the city - the area where the great Library stood. Caesar wrote of starting the fire in the harbor but neglected to mention the burning of the Library. Such an omission proves little since he was not in the habit of including unflattering facts while writing his own history. But Caesar was not without public detractors. If he was solely to blame for the disappearance of the Library it is very likely significant documentation on the affair would exist today. It does not.

The second story of the Library's destruction is more popular, thanks primarily to Edward Gibbon's "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". But the story is also a tad more complex. Theophilus was Patriarch of Alexandria from 385 to 412 A.D. During his reign the Temple of Serapis was converted into a Christian Church (probably around 391 A.D.) and it is likely that many documents were destroyed then. The Temple of Serapis was estimated to hold about ten percent of the overall Library of Alexandria's holdings. After his death, his nephew Cyril became Patriarch. Shortly after that, riots broke out when Hierax, a Christian monk, was publicly killed by order of Orestes the city Prefect. Orestes was said to be under the influence of Hypatia, a female philosopher and daughter of the "last member of the Library of Alexandria". Although it should be noted that some count Hypatia herself as the last Head Librarian. According to some, Theophilus ordered the burning of the library.

The belief held by most scholars is that in 640 AD the Moslems took the city of Alexandria. Upon learning of "a great library containing all the knowledge of the world" the conquering general supposedly asked Caliph Omar for instructions. The Caliph has been quoted as saying of the Library's holdings, "*they will either contradict the Koran, in which case they are heresy, or they will agree with it, so they are superfluous.*" So, allegedly, all the texts were destroyed by using them as tinder for the bathhouses of the city. Even then it was said to have taken six months to burn all the documents.

However the Library of Alexandria met her fate, the records of the ancient, complex civilizations established after Noah's flood were lost. As a result, much of our ancient past is unknown. (Adapted from *The Ancient Library at Alexandria* by Gerald Franz).